



GOP PICKS TWIN CITIES - 2008 Republican National Convention expected to draw 30,000 to St. Paul. Bipartisan committee courted both parties - down to the wire. - TOP CHOICE: Both parties favored the Twin Cities as a 2008 convention site, and the GOP got its commitment in first.

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CORRECTION+

Minnesota's emergence as a presidential battleground state paid off Wednesday when the Republican Party announced that it had chosen the Twin Cities to host its 2008 national convention.

The announcement elbowed aside the Democratic Party, which also was considering the Twin Cities and was negotiating with local officials as late as Wednesday morning.

Republican National Committee chairman Ken Mehlman credited the Twin Cities' bipartisan host committee for landing the convention, but particularly Republican Sen. Norm Coleman, who faces his first reelection bid in 2008 and undoubtedly will be prominent at the event.

"The house that Norm built is likely to be the place where the next president of the United States is introduced to the American people," Mehlman said. The convention will be held at the Xcel Energy Center, which was built while Coleman was mayor of St. Paul.

Coleman said he was thrilled by the decision, saying it would "showcase Minnesota to a worldwide audience."

The convention, which will be held a week after the Democratic convention, is expected to bring as many as 30,000 people to the Twin Cities and soak up as many as 20,000 hotel rooms in 95 hotels. It is also certain to mean closed-off streets, heavy security and lots of protesters.

Backers need to raise millions of dollars in private contributions of money and services. Officials said it wasn't clear Wednesday whether any state or local money would be needed to defray costs of the convention. The federal government is expected to bear security costs.

The Twin Cities beat three other finalists: New York, Cleveland and Tampa. It will be the first time the Twin Cities has hosted a national convention since 1892, when Republicans nominated Benjamin Harrison.

Republican National Committee (RNC) Cochairwoman Jo Ann Davidson said the GOP chose the Twin Cities in a voice vote of a nine-member selection committee. She declined to disclose the final tally but said "it was not unanimous." The deciding factor, she said, was not politics, but rather logistics such as arenas, work space, transportation, security and hotel rooms.

"This was a strictly business decision on our part," she said. "The committee decided that Minneapolis was the best choice."

Analysts nonetheless said the GOP's choice has political ramifications, allowing the party to capitalize on major media markets in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa, three states that figured prominently in the 2004 election.

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Democrats wanted to come

Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak said leading Democrats were expressing an interest in coming to the Twin Cities up until Wednesday morning. He said he talked with the Democratic national chair just hours before the decision was announced but was told the party couldn't commit soon enough to ward off the Republican bid.

The GOP's decision, expected to be ratified next January by the party's national committee, drew an angry response from some Democrats who expected their national convention to be in the Twin Cities. The Democrats now will go to New York or Denver.

Rick Stafford, a member of the executive committee of the Democratic National Committee from Minneapolis, said negotiations set for next week "would have pretty much cemented the deal." He said the GOP's decision showed that Republicans "cannot keep their honor in the site-selection process." He said as the non-incumbent party, Democrats should have been able to choose their site first in keeping with tradition.

"It just follows their whole scorched-earth ... philosophy that's running true to form this year," said Stafford, adding that "all the signals" indicated that Republicans were going to allow Democrats to choose their site first. He speculated that word got out that Democrats wanted the Twin Cities and that pressure was applied on the RNC by local Republicans to act quickly if they wanted to nail down the Twin Cities.

Republicans rejected Stafford's arguments, noting that they picked first when they took their convention to New York in 2004.

"Quite frankly, that's nonsense," Davidson said. "I have no idea what tradition they're discussing."

Rybak said that as part of the cities' bipartisan effort with Republicans, "we had promised we would pick whoever came first. We were very close with the Democrats, but they didn't make their choice and the Republicans did."

In Minnesota, city officials seemed inclined to put politics aside in favor of local boosterism.

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'In grand style'

"What this confirms to us is that the Twin Cities can compete with any region in the country, any city in the country," said St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman. "We're going to host this convention in grand style."

He added that a national political convention could be expected to generate more than \$150 million in economic spinoff for the Twin Cities area. Republicans put the figure at \$134 million, although some analyses suggest that might be high. For example, the city of Boston anticipated bringing in more than \$150 million by hosting the Democratic National Convention in 2004, but Suffolk University's Beacon Hill Institute analyzed the economic impact afterward and found it actually brought in closer to \$14.8 million.

Chris Coleman joked that the impact could be greater because Republicans have more money to spend.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty interjected: "We don't spend it."

Said Rybak: "I like to party, whether it's Republicans or Democrats."

Some local officials estimated that backers will have to raise \$45 million in private contributions, but that figure could be \$70 million or \$80 million, according to Vance Opperman, publisher and prominent DFL donor. Opperman was part of the local committee pushing the Twin Cities to both national parties.

Chris Coleman said an abundance of facilities means the state's capital won't need infrastructure upgrades before the 2008 event, he said. The Xcel Energy Center would house the convention and the attached RiverCentre would also be used for convention-related activities. "There are a lot of details to be worked out," he said.

When pressed about conditions in the city's confidential bid package for the convention, Chris Coleman said it didn't include any financial commitments from taxpayers, only a promise of access to local facilities.

Both parties, Opperman said, insisted that any city bidding for their convention must guarantee it could provide 17,000 hotel rooms within 30 minutes of the meeting site. Some requirements were surprisingly detailed, he said, such as a Republican demand that the temperature in rooms not go below 68 degrees.

Asked whether he was disappointed that it was the GOP that chose the Twin Cities, Opperman replied, "I am happier that the Republicans are coming than that neither party is coming."

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The strategic Midwest

"The Midwest has become strategic ground," said David Schultz, who teaches politics at Hamline University in St. Paul. "Bring the convention here, get the faithful excited, and spotlight that you care about the Midwest and farmers."

Schultz said it's also a "symbolic black eye" to Minnesota Democrats trying to keep alive the spirit of Hubert Humphrey and Paul Wellstone.

"It's a purple state now, and Republicans increasingly view this as a winnable state," he said.

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Staff writers Pat Doyle, Patricia Lopez, Rochelle Olson and Myron Medcalf contributed to this report.

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2008 REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION

Dates: Sept. 1-4, 2008

Visitors: Up to 30,000

Cost and benefit: Backers need to raise between \$45 million and \$80 million privately from local and national sources, and the federal government will bear security costs. Economic benefits for the area are estimated at between \$134 million and \$150 million, although some dispute those figures.

Hotel rooms: 17,000 needed; most will come from 95 hotels. Republicans want them to be no colder than 68 degrees.

Buses: 250 to 300 more needed daily.

Red or blue? Minnesota has a Republican governor but narrowly voted Democratic for president in 2004. Its congressional delegation is evenly split - one senator and four House members from each party.

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